

**Audio Transcript: United States Department of Justice Community Relations Service**

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**On Common Ground Episode 2 - Strengthening Relations with Arab American Communities  
09/09/2014****Opening Voice Over:**

Welcome to the US Department of Justice Community Relations Service podcast series On Common Ground. This series of podcasts is intended to profile successful problem-solving approaches to common challenges confronting cities and towns throughout the country, and to further cultural professionalism.

**Host:**

Hello and welcome to the US Department of Justice Community Relations Services podcast on Strengthening Relations with American Arab Communities. Joining us today is Abed Ayoub, legal and policy director for the Arab-American anti-discrimination committee, a National Arab-American civil rights organization with close to 30 chapters throughout the country and is headquartered in Washington DC. Welcome Abed.

**Abed Ayoub:**

Thank you I appreciate it.

**Host:**

Abed let's jump right into it, can you provide us with an overview of the size and makeup of the American-Arab population in the United States?

**Abed Ayoub:**

There is not an exact number because we are not counted on the census forms, but estimates have us between five and seven million Arab-Americans in the United States. A number of these Arabs are situated in a few cities, our largest concentration is the Metro Detroit area in Michigan. We have large populations in the New York area, Houston, Texas, Los Angeles, California, South Florida, and Northern Virginia. These metropolitan areas comprise of our largest concentrations. The countries that have the largest populations of Arab's here is Lebanon and Syria, there is also a growing population of Arab's coming from Yemen. There continues to be a growing number of immigrants coming to the US from the Arab world, particularly after the nineteen nineties and up to today. We are continuing to see growing populations from Sudan, from Somalia, Morocco, and Algeria as well. So the Arab population in the US is continuing to grow and we will hopefully see this number increase over the next few years as well.

**Host:**

To some people when they hear those countries and when they think of Arab-Americans they automatically think of Muslims, is that accurate?

**Abed Ayoub:**

That is not accurate in the United States a majority of Arab's are Christian in fact over seventy percent of Arab's in the United States are Christian. The Arab-American community is very diverse and is not monolithic there are a number of different beliefs in the community and a number of different religious components in the community, so to say that all Arab's are Muslim is, is not accurate such as the fact that not all Muslims are Arab as well. So the Arab-American community again it is very diverse a number of different religions are represented. The one thing they do share is a common culture, a common language, and a common tradition, and heritage, which comes from the Middle East and North Africa.

**Host:**

So I hear you saying that being an American-Arab or Arab-American has little or nothing to do with religion. It's more about culture, what are some of the similarities shared by American-Arabs?

**Abed Ayoub:**

You are correct being Arab or being Arab-American has nothing to do with religion. Arabs and Arab-Americans share a number of commonalities and similarities the most important of these is speaking Arabic or knowing the language of, of Arabic, which is the native language of the Middle East and North Africa. Other cultural things that the members of the Arab community share is maybe food, and dress in the way they behave, in the way they carry their family tradition so, these are just some of the aspects, cultural aspects, that they share.

**Host:**

Thank you Abed, so we know that following 9/11 that there was a spike in anti-Muslim sentiment and anti-Muslim hate activity directed at those who are perceived to be Muslim. Given the differences in the Arab-American or American-Arab culture did this backlash affect the entire community, or just those within the community that we're perceived to be Muslim?

**Abed Ayoub:**

Unfortunately shortly after 9/11 we began seeing an increase in the number of hate crimes directed towards the Muslim community and it did impact the Arab-American community as well after 9/11 the spike in hate crimes and the spike in discrimination impacted those that were perceived to be Arab or Muslim. Which included Sikhs, South Asians, and Hindu communities in that as well. The perpetrators of the hate and discrimination will look at somebody and they won't care if they're Muslim or Christian, they look different, and if they look like Arabs or they look like Muslims to them then they would inflict the discrimination or the hate crime and that's when we began seeing an increase. So yes the, the community as a whole was impacted regardless of what their religion is and regardless of, you know, where they actually were from. If, if, if they were perceived to be Arab or perceived to be Muslim they were victims and they were targeted and victims of hate crimes and discrimination.

**Host:**

So, given that dynamic will the new hate crime categories introduced by the FBI in 2014 help or have any type of impact?

**Abed Ayoub:**

It is our position that this box is a very positive step in the right direction it will help us tabulate and keep track of how many hate crimes and how many times Arab-Americans have been targeted and have fallen victim to hate crimes in the US. There has been a box which tracked hate crimes against Muslims, however the box which tracked hate crimes against Arabs did not exist and we also know there will be an addition of a Sikh box as well and a box for the Hindu community as well. So now these hate crimes will be tracked however the box alone will not change things. The box needs to be accompanied by training, and training law enforcement officials and officers to look out for and know what constitutes a hate crime against an Arab-American or against a member from the Arab country, so implementing these training programs across the country will help the box be effective, and at the same time the Arab-American community needs to continue, such as an organization as ADC, will continue educating the public about Arabs and who we are and hopefully we will start seeing a decrease in the number hate crimes and the number incidence targeting our community. But certainly the box goes a long way in helping us tabulate and recording these unfortunate incidents.

**Host:**

So let's take that a step further, what advice would your organization give to a local police department or any other local organization interested in strengthening their relationship with American-Arab communities?

**Abed Ayoub:**

I think first and foremost the local police department and any other law enforcement agency that wants to engage with the Arab-American community needs to understand that we are part of the American fabric and we are part of the American Society just as much as any other group. So in developing programs and developing a strategy in working with the Arab-American community it should be in line with the way these law enforcement agencies work with other communities as well. And it's important to understand as well that the Arab-American community is very diverse, there are a number of different political views a number of different religious views and a number of different educational backgrounds and socioeconomic backgrounds. But what all Arab-Americans have in common is they want to live in an environment that's safe and free of violence and free of crime so one strategy that's very important is to approach the Arab-American community to partner with law enforcement in issues that impact them on their daily lives. Such as, you know, watching out on how they can protect their children from child predators. How they can protect themselves from mortgage frauds, so these everyday issues that impact the American public also impact our community so when we can develop strategies and outreach strategies and pull the Arab-American community into these conversations that lays the groundwork for a strong relationship moving forward between local law enforcement and the community itself.

**Host:**

So what specific suggestions would you make to a police chief or any other leader of a local organization about how to engage are their particular venue specific things they can do what would your suggestions be on how to build that relationship?

**Abed Ayoub:**

The building of the relationship needs to be premised on one very important factor and that is the fact that the police chief or the police department needs to have knowledge of its community. It needs to understand who Arab-Americans are and who the respective community members are. So once that knowledge is established I would urge the local law enforcement officials or the police chief to meet with the community leaders, to meet with the community members who are representative of the Arabs in that certain area, so for example meet with the religious leaders or meet with the organizational leaders or the civic leaders and develop a relationship with these individuals. Once understanding of the community is established the police chief or the local leaders within the law enforcement agency can start meeting with civic leaders community leaders and religious leaders representing the Arab-Americans, and develop different plans and develop different strategies of how they can work together. One such strategy is to host town hall meetings where they can share and exchange ideas with the Arab-American community and discuss issues that are impacting them locally. One thing which we've seen work across the country is the establishment of the citizens Academy which gives Arab-Americans an opportunity to get a behind-the-scenes look of how law enforcement works how the law enforcement agency works and give them an opportunity to ask tough questions and get straight answers from the law enforcement agency. So that's, you know, one area we've seen.

We've also seen law enforcement agencies engage in sponsor different events such as career days, or job fairs, and make visits to the mosques. I think it's also very important, and get an understanding, again this goes back to as to who the community is and service their needs. It's also important to understand there are some things that, you know, should not be done. Such as when visiting the Mosque and, you know, don't wear your shoes in the prayer room or try not to take a canine into the mosque, and these things are also important in understanding, you know, who the community is and also the Arab-American community itself is very hospitable and it's, it's very welcoming so once that rapport is established the Arab-American community can be a strong partner in working with law enforcement and local law enforcement and protecting this country and protecting the respective areas which they serve. So that's why gaining the understanding and working together to build that trust should be a very fundamental aspect of any law enforcement agency that has a large population of Arab-Americans and its city, and also for, for areas that have high concentrations such as metro Detroit or Houston or Northern Virginia area.

It's important to have a liaison and that liaison be tasked with working with the community members in keeping in, you know, open line of dialogue and communication with the community members. If a liaison does not exist, it's important to start thinking of how one can be established and giving some roles to that liaison so they can constantly have somebody that's in touch with the community, answers the community's concerns, works with organizing these events, and helps, you know, facilitate dialogue between the two. Also it's important, again, I want to go back to the hosting of events, town halls are, are very important, town halls go a long way but other events as mentioned, job fairs, and it's also community dinners. You know for example during the holy month of Ramadan it may be a good idea to invite the Muslim American community and the community as a whole to an Iftar or fast-breaking and to give an opportunity over food and the breaking of bread to talk to each other and get a chance to know each other. So, these are ways of building trust, these are ways of gradually building trust and ensuring that the communities work together and many in the Arab-American community

understand that we may not agree on every issue that law enforcement in a community may not agree on every issue there may be some policy differences between the two. But as long as that open line of communication is there and the Arab-American community will have an opportunity to raise these concerns and hopefully these issues will be addressed and corrected appropriately and accordingly moving forward.

**Host:**

Thank you for that insight, we've been talking with Abed-Ayoub who is the Legal and Policy Director for the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee. A national Arab-American civil rights organization with close to 30 chapters throughout the United States. Abed, if someone was interested in speaking with you or speaking with the representative from one of your nearly 30 chapters, how would they get in touch with the ADC?

**Abed Ayoub:**

Well, I want to thank you for the opportunity for being with you here today and sharing our insight. It's greatly appreciated and we are very thankful for our relationship between CRS and the Arab-American community. If interested parties want to get in touch with the ADC you can visit our website at [www.ADC.org](http://www.ADC.org). You can also send an email to [ADC@ADC.org](mailto:ADC@ADC.org). Or you can give us a call at 202 244 2990, we have a fully staffed legal department we'll certainly be able to help you with any requests you have.

**Closing Voice Over:**

This has been a US Department of Justice Community Relations Service podcast. CRS provides confidential, no-cost dispute resolution services that support local efforts to address conflicts stemming from issues of race, color, and national origin and to prevent hate crimes committed on the basis of gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, and disability. To reach the Community Relations Service please call (202)305-2935.